

Harvard's Kennedy School -- A "Mark Twainian" Perspective

By
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In reflecting back over a year at the Kennedy School, it has become clear that at times I acted a *fool*. That is, in the context of Mark Twain's famous quote, "Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt." In classes this year, I removed all doubt more often than not. Yet, at the risk of digging deeper, I have three closing thoughts to share.

Beside his first name, I also love Twain's wit. To paraphrase him again 'habits are made to be coaxed and not thrown out.' A few of my habits were reinforced at Harvard this year. They are good habits to coax along and not litter on Littauer's steps. Each idea is embodied by a common object; things I carry along. One prop never leaves me, one I keep nearby, and the other is packed in my rucksack on every military deployment.

Let me begin with the third – what I pack on every assignment: books. "Really, books?" you say? Yes, books. Like many of you, I am a burned out student ready to escape the academic arena; I am done battling the gladiators and kings of this Forum. The last thing I want now is a further reminder to read.

Nevertheless, I loved being a student again but not necessarily in school again. Schooling is about deadlines and performance – society's necessary hurdle for proper entry into certain occupations or positions. But, education is a continuous enlightening and enriching process. To borrow from Twain again, "Don't let schooling interfere with your education."

Books open worlds and broaden perspectives. Although I was born and bred a military engineer and fighter aviator, I have learned to appreciate history and the humanities. These enable cross-cultural conversations – both mil-to-mil and mil-to-civilian – which are vital to our ongoing wars. The future is uncertain but as books attest, the future's past was equally uncertain and our forbearers survived, even thrived.

Thus, history more than recycles, it educates. In response, I intend to read on. However, as Twain warns, “Just be careful about reading health books as you may die of a misprint.”

So, what is my prop that I pack in my rucksack to remind me about reading? The US Constitution. Like many of you, I swore to defend the Constitution before I ever read the Constitution. Sure, in elementary school, I could recite the “We the People” preamble and I appreciated my patriotic duty to “provide for the common defense”. Yet, I never read the Constitution until I was pinning on Captain. Afterwards, I treasured even more what I had already sworn to uphold. The Constitution is a nuanced document and I admire our forefathers for sweating over each word. But, that is what men with pens can do together.

And that brings me to my second idea, the pen.

One thing my engineering, aviation and education experiences have taught me is to keep a pen ready. I am a visual man. A schematic, a figure or a picture is worth thousands of words. More importantly, a model scratched on the back of an envelope or on a napkin over tea can break barriers both intellectually and culturally. If you can simplify the complex to a drawing you can move the conversation toward solutions. Be ready to jot a note or steal wise words. Be ready to pen your own sharp thought. Be ready to exchange an idea with a chance stranger or an old acquaintance.

So, keep a pen handy because something to write on is always nearby. At the least, the universal palm pilot – which never needs batteries and can be erased with soap and warm water – is always connected to your fingers.

And, finally I arrive at my hands or, the first prop, and most important habit: a firm and friendly handshake. People are a lot like books and pens. What you see is not what you get; rather, what you comprehend are the critical components. Once the cover is cracked, anybody’s story comes to life. Each of us possesses a biography with pages added and edited daily. Experience and education are the material and our perceptions and interactions form the indelible ink.

Make the most of the people you meet. In whatever world your career takes you, a kind culturally correct greeting opens doors. The communities we are entering will be resource-challenged and reliant on “the whole of

government,” if not the “whole of a coalition” approach. An extended hand is the best beginning.

So, this brings me back to my last Twain quote, “Good friends, good books and a sleepy conscience: is the ideal life.” No one can promise you an ideal life (nor promise a good night’s sleep), but perhaps books, pens, and handshakes will serve you best as you embark on your journey in public or private service. Books, pens, and hands...now that’s not foolish.

Godspeed your careers and, bless our nation.

Lt Col Mark Ciero was an Air Force National Security Fellow at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government during the 2010-2011 academic year. The preceding article was originally published in the Kennedy School’s “TheCitizen” newspaper.